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OF

THE ROBIN REDBREAST

IN

EARLY ENGLISH POETRY.

A PAPER

READ BEFORE THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON,
DECEMBER 18, 1888.

BY

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WASHINGTON:
JUDD & DETWEILER, PRINTERS.
1889.

[FROM THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST FOR APRIL, 1889.]

MYTHS OF THE ROBIN REDBREAST IN EARLY ENGLISH POETRY.*

BY ROBERT FLETCHER, M. D.

Nearly five hundred years ago, a notable company was assembled one evening in a famous tavern in Eastcheap. There was the wild Prince, Sir John Falstaff, Bardolph, Poins, and Peto. The night had worn away in mirth and jollity. They had laughed their fill at Sir John's encounter with his eleven men in buckram, for it was the evening of the day of their famous exploit at Gad's Hill, when, suddenly, Dame Quickly entered, and said: "O' Jesu! my lord the prince, there is a nobleman of the court at door would speak with you." "What manner of man is he?" enquired Sir John Falstaff. "An old man," replied the hostess. Whereupon Sir John, characteristically forgetful of his own three-score years, broke forth with: "What doth gravity out of his bed at midnight?"

I fear that when the title of the address I am to make to you this evening was announced you may have been tempted to paraphrase Sir John's objurgation, and ask: "What doth gravity with tales of Cock Robin?" Well, it is good to be children again, occasionally, especially at Christmas time, and it is not long since a college professor read a paper before our oldest and most decorously grave Society upon the "Counting-out rhymes of children," which was discussed afterward with great animation, so I shall make no further apology for the triviality of my subject, but proceed to tell you something of what the old poets and playwrights have said of England's household bird, the charitable robin.

The Robin Redbreast is found all over Europe, for it is a migratory bird, and, at the approach of winter, large numbers of robins

* Read before the Anthropological Society of Washington, December 18, 1888.

are to be seen flying toward the south. They preserve a certain peculiar independence even then, for they never flock. There is an old Latin proverb referring to this: "*Unum arbustum non alit duos erithacos*"=One bush does not harbor two robins. This bird is not found in the United States, for I need scarcely remind you that our robin is a true thrush, many times larger than the English bird, through remembrance of which it obtained its name. The Robin Redbreast is a dainty little bird, scarcely weighing as much as the sparrow, but not at all resembling in shape that detestable little imported pirate. His plumage is an olive brown above and an orange red over the breast. He has full, dark, plaintive eyes, and his plump little body stands upon the thinnest of legs.

His song, though not powerful, is extremely sweet, and he sings throughout the winter, regardless of snow or cold, when all other birds, except, perhaps, the wren, are silent. It is characteristic of his confidence in man that he builds his nest oftentimes in the noisiest and most frequented places; as in a barn, where he will sit singing an accompaniment to the thresher's flail which almost reaches the beam upon which his nest is placed. Not long since a pair of robins built their nest in the roof of a railway bridge through which a hundred trains thundered every day.

While many robins leave England in the autumn and cross the channel to the southern shores of France and Spain, large numbers of them remain the winter through, taking up their abodes in gardens, and coming daily to the windows, at which they will tap, asking, as it were, for food.

A curious question arises in connection with the migration of the robins, which is thus expressed by an English writer: "If their winter's residence in Great Britain is compulsory, and only so because they cannot cross the sea to Spain or Portugal or France, in what manner did they first arrive among us? Was Great Britain at any time (as is usually believed) a part of the European continent? Did the Redbreasts establish themselves here before the German Ocean had wrought its way into the Atlantic, and before, therefore, Great Britain was an island; and were they left here and cut off from that continent by the separation? Again, is it because of the separation of America by the sea, both upon its European and Asiatic sides, and this even at its nearest approach to the opposite shores, that the Redbreast has never found its way into the New World? If so, was America separated from Asia more early

than Great Britain from France; or was the cold climate or the high latitude of the Americo-Asiatic junction, if ever existing, the more impervious obstacle to Robin Redbreast immigration?"

While this little bird is a favorite everywhere throughout Europe, in Great Britain he is regarded with particular interest and affection, and it is not difficult to account for this. His gentle, pleasing manners, his graceful plumage, his winter song, his confiding trust in man and his readiness to accept his hospitality, his habit of accompanying the residents of the dwelling he frequents in their walks, hopping from bough to bough in the hedge-row and cheering them with his song—all combine to make the robin an especial favorite; but when to these undoubted qualities are added the influence of the myths and legends which represent him as an inviolable friend and benefactor to the human race, according to his small capacity, it is no wonder that nursery rhymes are full of his adventures, and that poets never tire of alluding to his charitable acts.

How the bird acquired the name of Robin I cannot say. He is known as the *redbreast* in every language of Europe, but the Swedes call him *Tommy Liden*, and the Norwegians call him *Peter Ros-mad*, or redbreast. The poet Wordsworth, a close observer of nature, has many allusions to the robin; he refers in this manner to his names:

Art thou the bird whom man loves best,
The pious bird with the scarlet breast,
Our little English Robin;
The bird that comes about our doors
When autumn winds are sobbing?
Art thou the Peter of Norway boors?
Their Thomas in Finland,
And Russia far inland?
The bird, whom by some name or other
All men who know thee call their brother?

Robin is a generic name for a fairy of the household sort. We have Robin Goodfellow, Hobgoblin—Hob and Rob are interchangeable—and it has been suggested that the "household bird," as the poets love to call him, may have been looked upon as a household fairy, bringing good luck to his entertainers, and so have been named *Robin* Redbreast. It is certain that it was a common belief that to kill, maim, or imprison a robin was to entail misfortune upon the offender, and even upon the members of his household. The

wren, so frequently associated with the robin in nursery stories, shares also, to some extent, in this sacred character, which is likewise extended to the martin and the swallow. There is an old saying quoted in the Cheshire Glossary :

The robin and the wren
Are God's cock and hen ;
The martin and the swallow
Are God's mate and marrow.

Another form is :

The robin and the wren
Are God Almighty's cock and hen :
Him that harries their nest
Never shall his soul have rest.

In a volume of poems published in London, in 1770, by one George Smith, who describes himself in the title-page as "landscape-painter at Chichester, in Sussex," is this passage :

I found a robin's nest within our shed,
And in the barn a wren has young ones bred ;
I never take away their nest, nor try
To catch the old ones, lest a friend should die.
Dick took a wren's nest from his cottage-side,
And ere a twelvemonth past his mother died.*

Pope also, commenting upon the decay of reverence in the young, says :

The robin redbreast till of late had rest,
And children sacred held a martin's nest.†

and another writer, in an address to the robin, indignantly bursts forth :

For ever from his threshold fly,
Who, void of honor, once shall try,
With base inhospitable breast,
To bar the freedom of his guest.
O, rather seek the peasant's shed,
For he will give thee wasted bread,
And fear some new calamity
Should any there spread snares for thee ‡

* Six pastorals, etc., by George Smith, landscape-painter at Chichester, in Sussex. London, 1770, 4°, p. 30.

† Satire II, l. 37.

‡ Pott (J. H.) Poems. London, 8°, 1780, p. 27.

Before considering the myth especially connected with the Robin Redbreast—namely, his pious care for the unburied dead—there are some other characteristics which require notice. I have spoken of his winter visits to hospitable houses. This is charmingly described by the author of *The Seasons* :

The Redbreast, sacred to the household gods,
Wisely regardful of the embroiling sky,
In joyless fields and thorny thickets leaves
His shivering mates, and pays to trusted man
His annual visit. Half afraid, he first
Against the window beats ; then, brisk, alights
On the warm hearth ; then hopping o'er the floor,
Eyes all the smiling family askance,
And pecks, and starts, and wonders where he is—
Till, more familiar grown, the table-crumbs
Attract his slender feet.

Dr. John Donne, who was born in 1573, and who is chiefly known to scholars through his strong, racy satires which Pope thought worthy of modernizing, in an *Epithalamium* addresses Saint Valentine, upon whose day all birds select their mates, as follows :

Hail, Bishop Valentine ! whose day this is ;
All the air is thy diocese,
And all the chirping choristers
And other birds are thy parishioners ;
Thou marriest every year
The lyric lark, and the grave, whispering dove ;
The sparrow that neglects his life for love,
The household bird with [the] red stomacher.

Gray's exquisite verse will at once recur to your minds :

There scattered oft, the earliest of the year,
By hands unseen are showers of violets found ;
The redbreast loves to build and warble there,
And little footsteps lightly print the ground.

It is a curious fact that Gray omitted this beautiful verse from the first edition of his famous elegy, and it was restored by a later editor of his works. I suspect that the omission was "a case of conscience." The original of the last two lines is to be found in the Greek Anthology, and the translation of it by Wakefield is suggestive at least :

Nor print the feathered warbler in the Spring
His little footsteps lightly on my grave.

Another habit of the robin, which doubtless has added to the sacredness of character attributed to him, is that of selecting a church for his winter home, making the organ or quire his abiding place. In a play, written about the year 1500, entitled "The longer thou livest the more fool thou art," by William Wager, are these lines:

Robin Redbreast with his notes
Singing aloft in the quire,
Warneth to get you frieze coats,
For winter then draweth near.

Fifty years later Skelton represents a robin as performing a part of the mass:

Then the Redbreast
His tunes redrest
And sayde now wyll I holde
With the churche, for there
Out of the ayre
I kepe me from the colde.

Te per orbem terrarum
In usum Sarum;
He sange cum gloria,
Sancta was nexte;
And then the holye text
Confitebur ecclesia.*

After the death of Queen Mary, the wife of William of Orange, then William III of England, in 1694, a robin took up his abode upon the "hearse," or monument, of the Queen in Westminster Abbey. A ballad was written upon the subject which is to be found in D'Urfey's "Pills to purge melancholy." The writer says of the robin's song:

The tune is solemn, as if set
To fit some doleful ditty;
In lamentation for the Queen
To move all hearts to pity.

He is also a naturalist and observant of the habits of birds:

I call it *he*, not she, because
It sings and cocks its tail;
Which that no female robin doth,
I'll hold a pot of ale.

*A proper new boke of the Armoury of Birds [circa 1556].

He goes on to explain how a scandalous charge was made against the robin's loyalty :

Some say this bird an angel is ;
 If so, we hope 'tis good.
 But why an angel? Why, forsooth
 They say he takes no food.

But that the robin lives by meat
 Is true without dispute ;
 For tho' none ever saw him eat,
 Enough have seen him mute.

And that sometimes undecently,
 Upon the statue-royal,
 Which made some call him *Jacobite*,
 Or otherwise illoyal.

However, he thinks, in conclusion, that

The robin may have lost his mate,
 So hath King William his ;
 And that he well may match again
 Our hearty prayer is.

While it is probable that the natural qualities of the redbreast largely account for the affectionate regard in which he is held, there are two special reasons for the half-sacred character so constantly attributed to him, which are drawn from poetry and legend. One is that the robin redbreast upon all occasions, and often with supernatural intelligence, is the friend of man. The other is the belief that, with pious care, he covers the unburied dead with moss and leaves and flowers.

You all remember the ballad of *The Babes in the Wood*, which aroused our childish sympathies and tears, and how in the concluding verse we are told :

No burial this pretty pair
 From any man receives,
 Till robin redbreast, piously,
 Did cover them with leaves.

The ballad was first entered in the Stationer's Register, in London, October 15, 1595. This merely indicates the date of its first printing. How long before that time it had been recited by one generation to another it is, of course, impossible to say. Miss

Caroline Halsted, in her life of Richard the Third, vigorously advocates the theory that it was written during the reign of that king, and that the "cruel uncle" of the ballad was the crook-back tyrant himself. Richard was slain at the battle of Bosworth in 1485.

From the numerous allusions to the myth in the old poets and dramatists, it is certain that the belief in the redbreast's care for the dead is of considerable antiquity. The only passage bearing upon the subject in the classics, so far as I know, is to be found in Horace, though doves are the birds concerned. Milman gives this translation of it:

The vagrant infant on Mount Vultus's side,
Beyond my childhood's nurse, Apulia's bounds,
By play fatigued and sleep,
Did the poetic doves
With young leaves cover. Carm iii.

Skelton, who lived in Henry the Eighth's reign, and whose poems are still read by scholars for their strange meter and their fierce invective, particularly when Cardinal Wolsey is the subject, has a charming little poem upon the burial of a pet sparrow. The function of the priest is assigned to the redbreast, that of gossip, or reporter, to the magpie—the flecked or spotted pie:

The flecked pie to chatter
Of this dolorous matter.
And robyn redbreast
He shall be the preest,
The requiem masse to synge,
Softly warbelynge,
With helpe of the red sparrow
And the chattrynge swallow
This herse for to halow.

The redbreast is introduced by Shakspeare in one of his many beautiful dirges. In *Cymbeline*, Arviragus weeping over the supposed dead body of Fidele, the disguised Imogen, says:

With fairest flowers
Whilst summer lasts, and I live here, Fidele,
I'll sweeten thy sad grave: thou shalt not lack
The flower that's like thy face, pale primrose, nor
The azured hare-bell like thy veins, no, nor
The leaf of eglantine, whom not to slander
Out-sweetened not thy breath; the ruddock would

With charitable bill—O bill, sore-shaming
 Those rich-left heirs that let their fathers lie
 Without a monument!—bring thee all this;
 Yea, and furred moss besides, when flowers are none,
 To winter-ground thy corse *

Ruddock is a not uncommon name for the redbreast. It is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *ruð*, or red, from which we get ruddy and similar derivatives. In the old play of Damon and Pythias, published in 1562, one of the characters says of two children:

Did you ever see two such little robin ruddocks
 Laden with breeches? †

Collins, in his beautiful paraphrase of the dirge in Cymbeline, has this verse:

The redbreast oft at evening's hours
 Shall kindly lend his little aid,
 With hoary moss and gathered flowers,
 To deck the ground where thou art laid.

Drayton, a contemporary of Shakspeare, impresses a moral thus:

Covering with moss the dead's unclosed eye,
 The little redbreast teacheth charitie.

Ballads of an earlier date of publication than the *Babes in the Wood* contain allusions to the redbreast's charitable mission. In *The Soldier's Repentance*, printed in 1584, is this verse:

Come, gentle death, and end my grief;
 Ye pretty birds ring forth my knell;
 Let robin redbreast be the chief
 To bury me, and so farewell.

So, too, in another much older ballad, *The West Country Damo-sel's Complaint*, the lover who has deserted the damsel in question, and caused her death thereby, weeps over her dead body and resolves to die with her:

"Ah, wretched me!" he loudly cried,
 "What is it I have done?
 O, would to the Powers above I'd dyed
 when thus I left her alone:

* Cymbeline. Act IV, Sc. 2.

† Old Plays, I, 219 (1830).

Come, come, you gentle redbreast now,
 and prepare for us a tomb,
 Whilst unto cruel death I bow,
 and sing like a swan my doom."

In one of Dekker's plays the myth is employed figuratively :

They that cheer up a prisoner but with their sight are robin redbreasts that
 bring straws in their bills to cover a dead man in extremity !

Villanies discovered by lanthorn and candlelight, 1616.

A contemporary dramatist with Dekker, Thomas Heywood, in his play of *The Wonder of a Kingdom*, iii, 1, 1636, applies it rather ludicrously. A man returns to his native place half naked and in dire distress and poverty. He asks aid of his wealthy but unfeeling brother, Torenti, saying :

" Oh, remember this,
 He that does good deeds here waits at a table
 Where angels are his fellow-servitors."

To which the hard-hearted Torenti replies :

" I am no robin redbreast to bring straws
 To cover such a corse."

In that very powerful, but almost ghastly, tragedy by John Webster, *The White Devil*, or *Vittoria Corombona*, printed in 1612, there is a dirge which Charles Lamb well pronounced unequalled. Cornelia, who has gone distracted over the murder of her son, tells her attendants that her grandmother, when she heard the bell toll, was wont to sing this dirge to her lute :

Call for the robin redbreast and the wren,
 Since o'er shady groves they hover
 And with leaves and flowers do cover
 The friendless bodies of unburied men.
 Call unto his funeral dole
 The ant, the field-mouse, and the mole,
 To rear him hillocks that shall keep him warm
 And (when gay tombs are robbed) sustain no harm ;
 But keep the wolf far thence, that's foe to men,
 For with his nails he'll dig them up again.

Act v, sc. 4.

Observe the strength of the fourth line. Was there ever a more pathetic picture of utter neglect and desolation !

A forgotten play by a forgotten writer, *Niobe Dissolved* under a Nilus, by Stafford, published in 1611, makes this humorous allusion to the legend:

“On her (the nightingale) waites Robin in his redde livorie, who sits as a crowner on the murthered man; and seeing his body naked plays the sorrie tailour to make him a mossy rayment.”

Cowley, a little later, writes :

Thus I would waste, thus end my careless days,
And robin redbreasts, whom men praise
For pious birds, should, when I die,
Make both my monument and elegy.

Sylva, 1681, p. 51.

I make these many quotations from the poets and dramatists of the palmy days of English literature, the Elizabethan era, to show you how widely spread must have been the legend we are considering, for the allusions to it are very numerous. It was a well-established and popular myth at least 300 years ago. Not only was a pious care for the uncovered dead the self-assumed function of the robin, but he is constantly represented as engaged in some benevolent task, befriending man and helping the innocent and oppressed.

Perhaps not many of my hearers have chanced to meet with *Britannia's Pastorals*, by William Browne. He was one of the Elizabethan authors, a contemporary of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Spenser. His *Pastorals* were published in 1611, and were keenly appreciated and admired. Ben Jonson, no mean judge, praises them highly, and yet, with all their merits, they dropped completely out of remembrance and were as if they had never been written. They were reprinted about the end of the last century, and twenty years ago a superb edition of them was published in the Roxburge Library, a series of reprints of choice old English masterpieces. That millions of books should be forgotten is natural, and, mostly, desirable, but that good matter should so utterly vanish is a not unmelancholy subject for reflection. Singularly enough, a famous epitaph ascribed to Ben Jonson, and which has been admired by three centuries of English readers, was really written by this forgotten Browne. I refer to the epitaph on the Countess of Pembroke.

The Britannia's Pastorals of this resuscitated poet may, in many respects, take rank with Spenser's Faery Queene, which it resembles in its general plan. There are brutal giants, lovely and oppressed maidens, and gallant knights to rescue them. One episode belongs to our subject, and must be briefly told. Marina is a beautiful virgin who has been captured by a caitiff wretch, named Limos, who has imprisoned her in the Cave of Famine, where he lives. Here she is likely to starve, when what happened you shall hear :

A little robin redbreast one clear morn
 Sate sweetly singing on a well-leaved thorn ;
 Whereat Marina rose, and did admire
 He durst approach from whence all else retire ;
 And pitying the sweet bird, what in her lay
 She fully strove to fright him thence away.
 " Poor harmless wretch," quoth she, " go seek some spring,
 And to her sweet fall with thy fellows sing,
 Fly to the well-replenish'd groves and there
 Do entertain each swain's harmonious care ;
 Traverse the winding branches ; chant so free
 That every lover fall in love with thee.

* * * *

Do this, thou loving bird, and haste away
 Into the woods ; but if so be thou stay
 To do a deed of charity on me
 When my pure soul shall leave mortality,
 By cov'ring this poor body with a sheet
 Of green leaves, gathered from a valley sweet.
 It is in vain ; these harmless limbs must have
 Than in the caitiff's womb no other grave.
 Hence then, sweet robin, lest in staying long
 At once thou chance forego both life and song."
 With this she hush'd him thence, he sung no more,
 But 'fraid the second time, flew toward the shore.
 Within as short time as the swiftest swain
 Can to our May-pole run and come again,
 The little redbreast to the prickled thorn
 Returned, and sung there as he had beforne.
 And fair Marina to the loop-hole went,
 Pitying the pretty bird, whose punishment
 Limos would not defer if he were spied.
 No sooner had the bird the maiden eyed,
 But leaping on the rock, down from a bough
 He takes a cherry up, which he but now
 Had thither brought, and in that place had laid

Till to the cleft his song had drawn the maid,
 And flying with the small stem in his bill,
 (A choicer fruit than hangs on Bacchus'* hill)
 In fair Marina's bosom took his rest,
 A heavenly seat fit for so sweet a guest.

* * * * *

Here left the bird the cherry, and anon
 Forsook her bosom and for more is gone,
 Making such speedy flights into the thick
 That she admir'd he went and came so quick.
 Then, lest his many cherries should distaste,
 Some other fruit he brings than he brought last.
 Sometime of strawberries a little stem,
 Oft changing colors as he gather'd them;
 Some green, some white, some red on them infus'd,
 These lov'd, those fear'd, they blush'd to be so used.
 The peascod green, oft with no little toil
 He'd seek for in the fattest fertil'st soil,
 And rend it from the stalk to bring it to her,
 And in her bosom for acceptance woo her.
 No berry in the grove or forest grew,
 That fit for nourishment the kind bird knew,
 Nor any powerful herb in open field,
 To serve her brood the teeming earth did yield,
 But with his utmost industry he sought it,
 And to the cave for chaste Marina brought it.

* * * * *

But our charitable little bird was not content to supply the captive maiden with fruits; he exerted his ingenuity to find her something more nutritious. As she gazed out of her cell window on the stretch of sea-beach and rocks which the retreating tide had left uncovered:

she spies

A busy bird that to and fro still flies
 Till pitching where a hateful oyster lay,
 Opening his close jaws—closer none than they,
 Unless the griping fist, or cherry lips
 Of happy lovers in their melting sips.
 Since the decreasing waves had left him there
 He gapes for thirst, yet meets with nought but air,
 And that so hot, ere the returning tide,
 He in his shell is likely to be fried;

* Cithæron in Boetia.

The wary bird a pretty pebble takes
 And claps it 'twixt the two pearl hiding flakes
 Of the broad yawning oyster, and she then
 Securely picks the fish out, as some men
 A trick of policy thrust, 'tween two friends,
 Sever their powers, and his intention ends.
 The bird thus getting that for which she strove
 Brought it to her, to whom the queen of love
 Served as a foil, and Cupid could no other,
 But fly to her mistaken for his mother.
 Marina from the kind bird took the meat,
 And, looking down, she saw a number great
 Of birds, each one a pebble in his bill,
 Would do the like, but that they wanted skill.

* * * * *

Time will not allow me to pursue further the adventures of the fair Marina, whose life was saved by the watchful care of the robin redbreast, much to the astonishment of her captor, whose delight it was to starve his prisoners to death in the Cave of Famine.

Fida, another heroine of the same poem, sees her pet hind torn to pieces by Riot, whereupon

A little robin sitting on a tree
 In doleful notes bewailed her tragedy.
 Book i, song 4.

The sweetest of English lyric poets, Robert Herrick, seems to have had an especially tender feeling toward the redbreast, and there are many references in his *Hesperides*, which was published in 1647, to the bird's supposed care for the unburied dead. It is surprising how comparatively unknown is this most charming poet. For vigor of imagination, for tenderness, and for melodious versification, his lyrics are unexcelled by anything in the English language.

Here is an epitaph he wrote for himself:

TO ROBIN REDBREAST.

Laid out for dead, let thy last kindnesse be
 With leaves and moss-worke for to cover me;
 And while the wood-nymphs my cold corse inter,
 Sing thou my dirge, sweet-warbling chorister!
 For epitaph, in foliage, next write this
Here, here, the tomb of Robin Herrick is.

In another place he addresses the nightingale and robin redbreast :

When I departed am, ring thou my knell,
 Thou pittifull and pretty Philomel;
 And when I'm laid out for a corse, then be
 Thou sexton, redbreast, for to cover me.

But the most arch and delightful of his pictures of the redbreast's sexton-like propensities is the piece upon Mrs. Elizabeth Wheeler, under the name of Amaryllis :

Sweet Amarillis, by a spring's
 Soft and soule-melting murmurings
 Slept; and thus sleeping, thither flew
 A robin redbreast, who at view,
 Not seeing her at all to stir,
 Brought leaves and mosse to cover her;
 But while he, perking, there did prie
 About the arch of either eye,
 The lid began to let out day,
 At which poore robin flew away;
 And seeing her not dead, but all disleaved,
 He chirpt for joy to see himself deceived.

A later writer, Richard Hole, in his poem of Prince Arthur, describes the discovery in the woods of the dead body of Cador, one of the characters of his poem :

Now Cador's corse he viewed,
 With hoary moss and faded leaves bestrewed;
 In days of old not yet did we invade
 The harmless tenants of the woodland shade.
 The crimson-breasted warbler o'er the slain,
 While frequent rose his melancholy strain,
 With pious care, 'twas all he could, supplied
 The funeral rites by ruthless man denied.

Among the many legends relating to the robin there are some which account for the distinctive orange color of his breast.

Mr. Lecky, in his *History of European Morals*, quotes this one : "The redbreast, according to one popular legend, was commissioned by the Deity to carry a drop of water to the souls of unbaptized infants in hell, and its breast was singed in piercing the flames."

Another legend represents him as carrying dew in his beak to the lost souls in hell, and burning his breast in this pious work; and still another describes him as engaged in quenching the fires of the burning pit by the same process and with the same result.

Whittier has embodied these latter myths in his poem, *The Robin*. The old Welshwoman reproves her grandson for throwing stones at the robin, saying:

“ have you not heard,
My poor, bad boy! of the fiery pit,
And how, drop by drop, this merciful bird
Carries the water that quenches it?
“ He brings cool dew in his little bill,
And lets it fall on the souls of sin;
You can see the mark on his red breast still
Of fires that scorch as he drops it in.
“ My poor Bron rhuddyn! my breast-burned bird,
Singing so sweetly from limb to limb,
Very dear to the heart of our Lord
Is he who pities the lost, like him!”
“ Amen!” I said to the beautiful myth;
“ Sing, bird of God, in my heart as well;
Each good thought is a drop wherewith
To cool and lessen the fires of hell.”

Another beautiful superstition current in Brittany is that as Christ was on his way to Calvary, bending under the weight of his cross, a robin plucked out a thorn from the crown which pressed upon the patient sufferer's brow, and the blood, which spurted out, dyed the breast of the bird a scarlet hue, and ever since that time the robins have had red breasts, and have been the friends of man.

It is not surprising, when you consider the early relations of the ancient Cymri and the Bretons, that the same story is met with in Wales.

This is the version of the legend as given by a Welsh clergyman:

“ It was on the day when Lord Jesus felt his pain upon the bitter cross of wood that a small and tender bird, which had hovered awhile around, drew nigh, about the seventh hour, and nestled upon the wreath of Syrian thorns. And when the gentle creature of the air beheld those cruel spikes, the thirty and three, which pierced that bleeding brow, she was moved with compassion and

the piety of birds; and she sought to turn aside, if but one of those thorns, with her fluttering wings and her lifted feet! It was in vain! She did but rend her own soft breast, until blood flowed over her feathers from the wound! Then said a voice from among the angels: "Thou hast done well, sweet daughter of the boughs! Yea, and I bring thee tidings of reward: Henceforth, from this very hour, and because of this deed of thine, it shall be that, in many a land, thy race and kind shall bear upon their bosoms the hue and banner of thy faithful blood; and the children of every house shall yearn with a natural love towards the birds of the ruddy breast, and shall greet their presence, in its season, with a voice of thanksgiving!"*

Here is the legend told in poetry:

Bearing his cross, while Christ passed forth forlorn,
His godlike forehead by the mock crown torn,
A little bird took from that crown one thorn
To soothe the dear Redeemer's throbbing head.
That bird did what she could; his blood, 'tis said,
Down-dropping dyed her tender bosom red.
Since then no wanton boy disturbs her nest;
Weasel nor wilddcat will her young molest;
All sacred deem that bird of ruddy breast.†

There is another myth to which I have found but one reference. There are certain small hawks known as *merlins*, and the story is that in winter time these birds capture the robins and keep them prisoners all night in order that they (the merlins) may be kept warm by the red breasts of the robins. A poet of some renown in his day, George Gascoigne, whose *Complaint of Philomene* was published in 1576, thus describes this curious legend:

Or as the red breast byrds,
Whome prettie merlynnes hold,
Ful fast in foote, by winter's night
To fende themselves from colde.

Though afterwards the hauke
For pitie let them scape,
Yet al that day they fede in feare,
And doubt a second rape.

* Notes and Queries, vi (1 s.), 1852, 344.

† Quoted, but author unknown, in Notes and Queries, 1869 (4 s.), iv, 390, claimed by John Hoskyns-Abrahall, at p. 507.

And in the nexter night,
 Ful many times do crie,
 Remembering yet the ruthful plight
 Wherein they late did lye.*

I think I must have convinced you that the myths which represent the robin redbreast as the friend of man, and especially as caring for the unburied human dead, are very ancient and very widely spread.

And now naturally arises the question, How and when did these myths originate? The legends connected with the crimson breast of the bird may readily be supposed to have had their origin in poetic fancy, though, even under that view, the invariable benevolence or charity ascribed to him in each of these pretty myths would seem to denote an already-established reputation for those qualities. You will remember that in the earliest quotation I gave you, that, namely, from Skelton, in 1556, the half-sacred character of the redbreast is strikingly indicated. At the outset of the inquiry we are met with the invariable obstacle which attends all attempts to unravel the origin of myths—the impossibility of penetrating the obscurity of unlettered periods in the history of nations or tribes. The word itself, indeed, indicates the difficulty—*μῦθος*, *fabula*, *a myth*, or, more properly, *a mythe*—meant, in early Greek days, *a story* without any particular character attached to it of either truth or falsehood. As society progressed intellectually, a higher standard of belief and credibility was established, and the myth became a narrative, unattested and, for the most part, avowedly fictitious. In the earlier ages such narratives had passed unquestioned, being well suited to the uncritical minds and natural credulity of the hearers. With the establishment of history—and the Greek *ιστορία* was, as Grote has pointed out, the exact opposite of *μῦθος*, or the myth, consisting of facts known to the describer, or the result of his personal inquiries, the myth was relegated to the common people, over whose imagination it still held sway, and became a welcome guest in poetry.

Aristotle defines a myth to be an amplification or excessive exaggeration of a doctrine or narration which is in the main true or credible. He speaks of the *φιλόμυθος*, *the myth-lover*, *the philom myth*, as we may translate it, in not at all contemptuous contrast with

*The Complaint of Philomene, George Gascoigne, London, 1576 (Arber's Repr.), p. 110.

the φιλόσοφος, or philosopher. Let us feel glad that philomyths are found in such respectable company.

There is, I think, a distinction to be made, as regards the probability of their antiquity, between the myths which are preserved in the written and printed records of civilized peoples and those which are related orally among uncivilized tribes or nations. The strongest proof of the antiquity of a myth is that it has outlived all accounts or knowledge of its origin, and where there is a permanent written or printed literature to which reference can be made, such as I have attempted in the matter of the robin redbreast, the probability of the ancientness of the legend becomes greatly enhanced. With stories that are related by word of mouth, the recollection of their origin must depend on the memory only, and by such a method of transmission, with its incidental variations, any certainty as to their origin being remote or recent becomes difficult or impossible of attainment. It must be admitted, however, that the myth has a wonderful quality of imperishability. Kingdoms have disappeared, empires have been overthrown, religions have been displaced by new beliefs, but myths have traveled down the ages, repeated by nation after nation, modified by language and surroundings, but still recognizable and apparently immortal. A sun-myth from early Aryan times has been ingeniously made use of to prove that Napoleon never existed.

The terms myth, legend, saga, have been employed too often as if they were synonymous, and yet there is, or was, a clear distinction between them. The myth is a fable, a story which always contains the supernatural or the impossible. The legend, from λέγειν, *to tell*, is a story, sometimes related in form of verse, which, while dealing largely in the marvelous and romantic, does not necessarily include the impossible. This is shown by the qualifying adjectives applied to it, as "a lying legend," "a false legend." No one thinks of saying "a lying myth," no suspicion of truthfulness being attached to it. The saga is a Scandinavian word derived from the Icelandic *saga*, a story or saying. The cognate English word for it is *saw*, a short saying or maxim. The saga, like the legend, deals in the wonderful, but is generally a more elaborate production, more carefully constructed, and is nearly always poetical in form.

It is of little use, however, to attempt to bring back any form of nomenclature to its etymological basis; language is regarded as the

property of the people, and we must be content to follow after the majority in their method of employing it.

I shall conclude this sketch by reciting to you a poem which represents our interesting little friend as still engaged on a benevolent errand for the benefit of man.

In Brittany, the land of legend and romance, they have a saying of any undertaking which has succeeded, though it had but a small beginning: "It is like Robin Redbreast's corn." How the saying originated the poem will tell you.

Early in the sixth century Saint Leonore and his associates landed in Brittany and strove to introduce Christianity and the arts of civilization among the heathen inhabitants, and to their early efforts, it is said, the conversion of the people and their rapid progress in the social scale is due.

Saint Leonore is the subject of many marvelous legends, but while we may smile at the story of the saint's hanging his cloak upon an obliging sunbeam, and like supernatural incidents, we must remember that to the indomitable courage, the marvelous self-denial, the stern enthusiasm of the early saints and martyrs of the Catholic Church modern civilization is deeply indebted. They threw themselves among the people they went to convert, were of them, lived their life, and gained their confidence. Modern missionary work is admitted, even by the religious community, to be a failure, for the respectable church missionary, with his decorous wife and children, his decent home, his Sunday outpouring of dogmas and platitudes, is a man apart from the people to whom he is sent, and fails to turn them from their heathenism. Even the vulgar and ridiculous Salvation Army is, at this day, it is said, converting the natives of India by the thousand to their form of Christianity for the simple reason that they live with them and are a part of them.

The poem in question is a very homely one, and the versification is rugged, but you will forgive those faults on account of the pretty myth contained in it, and the sound moral it conveys.

A STORY OF SAINT LEONORE.

In a pleasant sunward hollow
Of the barren purple fell,
They have built a rustic chapel,
Hung a little tinkling bell.

There, alone in Christ believing,
Wait the brothers God's good time
When shall spread the Gospel tidings
Like a flood from clime to clime.

Yonder is a Druid circle
Where the priests dance on the dew,
Singing of Ceridwen's kettle
And the ploughing of old Hu.

Now the brothers cut the heather,
Stack the turf for winter fire;
Wall about with lichen'd moor-stones
The enclosure of their byre.

Next they drain a weedy marish,
Praying in the midst of toil;
And with plough of rude construction,
Draw slight furrows through the soil.

Then seek wheat. It was forgotten!
All their labour seems in vain.
The barbarian Kelts about them
Little know of golden grain.

Said the abbot: "God will help us
In this hour of bitter loss."
Then one spied a Robin Redbreast
Sitting on a wayside cross.

Doubtless came the bird in answer
To the words the monk did speak,
For a heavy wheat-ear dangled
From the Robin's polished beak.

Then the brothers, as he dropped it,
Picked it up and careful sowed,
And abundantly in autumn
Reaped the harvest where they strewed.

Do you mark the waving glory
O'er the Breton hill-slopes flung?
All that wealth from Robin Redbreast's
Little ear of wheat has sprung.

Do you mark the many churches
Scattered o'er that pleasant land?
All results are of the preaching
Of that venerable band.

Therefore, Christian! small beginnings
Pass not by with lip of scorn;
God may prosper them, as prospered
Robin Redbreast's ear of corn.